



A NATIONAL AGENDA
for
YOUNG CHILDREN in
AUSTRALIA

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A paper prepared for members of parliament and their advisers by the membership of NIFTeY

Recognising:

- the challenges that face Australian families - poverty, under employment and overwork, job insecurity, casualisation of the workforce, the increasing gap between the wealthy and poorer members of our society and a common perception that individuals have little control over their own life circumstances or the future opportunities for their children
- the disturbing increase in some of the indicators of a society in trouble - mental illness, suicide, drug abuse, and widening gaps in educational outcomes as well as the perception and reality of increasing lawlessness and criminal activity
- the importance of the interaction between early life experiences and our genetic make-up and of building resilience to cope with rapid and inhospitable changes in society
- the complex causal pathways that lead to optimal or poor outcomes for children and young people - and ultimately the health and wealth of the nation.

Valuing and respecting

- children as children as well as their potential for shaping the nation's future
- parents unique and vital role in nurturing their children
- well trained, motivated individuals and groups who work with children and families
- communities that work together for mutual support and to enhance healthy growth and development of children.

Federal, State and Territory Governments agree to work together, across sectors and in consultation with parents and community to develop a NATIONAL AGENDA FOR AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN.

There is clear evidence that all levels of government recognised that many Australian families are in trouble and that, for a significant number of Australian young people, it may be too late to prevent adverse outcomes. There is evidence that Governments have recognised the importance of prevention and early intervention. Governments have responded with a number of initiatives to reduce the impact of changing economic circumstances and interventions to support families who are experiencing adverse circumstances. Governments have recognised the need for timely and reliable data to identify needs and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

The governments of Australia acknowledge that they may not have recognised or have been perceived as responding adequately to the extent of alienation and despair within Australian society and the degree to which this pervades all levels of society, not only those recognised as disadvantaged. These effects are borne most strongly by the most vulnerable of our society - including families with young children.

Governments acknowledge that they may not have fully recognised the need for urgent, well researched, well coordinated action by the community and all levels/sectors of Government to respond to a social and health crisis that is threatening and wide-spread. Governments acknowledge that a whole of government, whole of community response is required, directed at those critical points in the life cycle where intervention is known to be most effective.

The governments of Australia acknowledge that the development of a National Agenda for Children that is based on available research evidence and ongoing research, including consultation with the community and, where possible, children and young people themselves, will provide a clear indication that governments recognise the needs of children and families in a rapidly changing society and the need for setting clear directions and priorities for action.

Key components of a National Agenda for Children

Recognising that all levels of government have a range of responsibilities that impinge on the lives of young children and their families, and that concerted and collaborative "whole of government" and cross- governmental responses are needed to address the growing crisis affecting the health and well being of Australia's children and young people, the governments of Australia will establish a Prime Ministerial Council on Developmental Health and Well Being that reports to the Council of Australian Governments and will oversee the development of this National Agenda.

Recognising that optimal human growth and development begins during gestation.

- Federal, State and Territory Governments will work together to enhance (Australia wide) the capacity of the public health system to work with pregnant women and their partners to enhance foetal health and well being. Government's role may be most effective in the areas of information provision; encouraging and facilitating communication and co-operation between hospital clinics, GPs, community workers and volunteers to identify and meet the needs of hard to reach women and families; funding evaluation of programs and facilitating the widespread up-take of programs shown to be effective in improving the health and well being of young children and their families.
- Federal, State and Territory Governments will ensure the continuation of successful pilot programs for pregnant women and their families and, where appropriate, the revision or curtailment of less effective programs.
- State/Territory, local governments will fund the training of child health and community health workers to collect data on patient populations and outcomes, to evaluate their work and to assess that their interventions are accessed by all pregnant women early in pregnancy.
- All levels of governments will facilitate research into the factors influencing women to continue smoking or to engage in other behaviours that have adverse effects on the foetus.

They will also recognise that strategies, over and above the provision of information may be necessary for women and families experiencing difficult and stressful life experiences and will promote the development of capacity within the workforce to engage in these strategies.

- Recognising that recent scientific evidence identifies stress during pregnancy to be an adverse influence on the foetus, over and above the effects of poor nutrition and the use of legal and illicit substances, governments will work together to establish a safe environment for women of physical and emotional harm, to provide advice and assistance to obtain adequate housing and income for disadvantaged families.
- Recognising that involvement and participation by women and their families in establishing needs and effective solutions is essential for successful outcomes, governments will fund community health nurses and maternity hospitals to combine education efforts with resourcing of self-help groups for women and families to identify ways in which they could improve the health and well being of the foetus to ensure the best possible outcome of the new-born infant and its health throughout the Early Years.
- Recognising the importance of the Early Years for health and well being throughout life and respecting and valuing the crucial role of parents.

Federal, State and Territory Governments will work together to:

- establish awards and tax incentives for business to encourage business to be family friendly. For example
 - unpaid, part or fully paid maternity/paternity leave following the birth of a new baby
 - on site quality child-care or company subsidised child-care in close proximity to the work place
 - arrangement for after school care for employee's children
 - flexible working hours to fit in with family arrangements where possible
 - work from home arrangements where practical.
- government departments will themselves set an example by adopting family friendly work practices.
- governments, recognising that parents need a conviction of self worth, security and a sense of control in the workplace if they are to do a good job of parenting, will establish awards or tax incentives for businesses that encourage worker participation in the organisation and management of their workplace eg, education programs for workers to explain the business objectives. Acceptance of worker suggestions to improve business operation. Time limited share offers to encourage long term commitment on the part of workers. Evidence of company commitment to retaining and valuing employees.

Recognising that families often need support and resources to do a good job of parenting. Federal, State and Territory Governments to work together to:

- make voluntary home visiting programs universally available by funding quality programs that are subject to evaluation and on-going refinement following evaluation
- ensure that sustainability of successful pilot programs

- make extra resources available to support parents who have particular needs such as those experiencing poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, intellectual disability or have children with special needs through strategies such as professional home visiting, mental health promotion and other services
- ensure the continuation of programs for disadvantaged children throughout the Early Years and into primary school to ensure these children are ready for school and have reduced risk of school failure
- ensure that high quality child-care is accessible and affordable to all families
- improve training, remuneration and remuneration of child-care workers recognising the importance of attracting and retaining the best possible individuals for this most important of vocations
- increase the stock of public housing. Maintain stock distribution in middle class areas. Avoid establishing ghettos of disadvantage in isolated suburbs with poor transport and employment opportunities
- facilitate the availability of toy libraries and play groups that are accessible to all
- ensure that new services are set up with community consultation and genuine participation in management sharing, communication and continuity of care between services

Acknowledging that the development of this nation is based on the foresight of past leaders in establishing universal, compulsory education of children.

- All sectors of government to continue commitment to supporting and developing public education facilities in Australia.

Recognising that healthy growth and development of children is everyone's business, governments to work together to:

- create employment opportunities in centres of high unemployment
- facilitate community problem solving capabilities by resourcing self help groups, making land available for sporting and other community activities, affirming the work of volunteers (commendations, awards etc) and subsidising successful community projects.

Recognising that some children are in situations that seriously endanger their health and welfare and are in need of urgent action to prevent permanent damage to growth and development governments will work together to ensure:

- agencies have adequate numbers of well trained staff to recognise and respond to dangerous situations
- agencies have a mandate to remove children rapidly from situations of danger but also have the resources to work with parents and other family members to restore the child to the family whenever possible
- agencies have the resources to provide children removed from their families with a safe, emotionally secure and healthy environment, recognising that most of these children will need on-going psychological support because of their adverse experiences.

Recognising that every need identified in the general community applies more urgently to indigenous children and their families, all levels of government will work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure that indigenous children can grow and develop in their Early Years to become healthy, competent adults.

Recognise that, while the key elements of a National Agenda for Children are equally relevant to the indigenous children of Australia, the degree of disadvantage and the entrenched nature of the problems affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will require the development of a separate Agenda for Indigenous children and families.

Recognising that the policies and strategies contained within this **National Agenda for Australian Children** must be based on evidence supplied by new research and the analysis of existing research and that much of the evidence for effectiveness of early childhood intervention is based on overseas research, all levels of government will work with the corporations, research institutions and those who work with children to:

- establish a multidisciplinary research partnership for the Early Years
- ensure that a dynamic national research agenda for the promotion of developmental health and well being is developed through establishing an interface between the research partnership, the Prime Ministerial Council on developmental health and well being and non-government service providers.

Recognising that use of scarce resources must be effective.

- Government sponsored programs are, wherever possible, based on the available evidence of efficacy and all programs are funded with an adequate evaluation component.
- Successful programs are sustained and ineffective programs terminated or redeveloped.